

# Pike County mine features 'safe house'

**Vectren's Prosperity mine continues to improve safety**

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PETERSBURG, Ind. - Workers at Vectren Corporation's Prosperity coal mine hope the underground facility's latest feature remains unused.

The mine, which weaves through several miles of tunnels under the rolling hills of northwest Pike County, is the only mine in the Tri-State to have an underground emergency shelter, dubbed "the safe house" by superintendent Bill Nash.

"It's something we hope we'll never use," Nash said Wednesday during a tour of the mine. "And we probably won't have to."

Behind two steel doors one mile from the mine's opening, two emergency rooms are equipped with a ventilation system pumping fresh air in from 300 feet above and carbon dioxide out. The rooms also store water, food, blankets, medical supplies and even games to keep its occupants busy.

The safe rooms each measure 18 feet by 50 feet and both can accommodate everyone inside the mine at any given time, Nash said. The mine employs 280 contract miners working in three shifts.

An eight-inch pipeline installed in the ceiling allows rescuers on the surface to drop in food or other supplies to those below and provides for a communication line to be installed to a phone inside the shelter.

If needed, rescue workers can set up equipment on the surface and drill through the ground in order to get to miners inside the room. The rooms can also serve as staging areas for rescuers attempting to reach miners in other areas.

The room was one of several safety features Vectren officials showed reporters Wednesday.

"Everything in mining is hinged on safety," Nash said. "Mining is still a very safe industry."

In 2005, the Prosperity mine received top honors among area underground mines for having the fewest accidents per 200,000 man hours worked. The mine also ended 2005 with 1 injury for every 1 million tons mined, the best rate in the area.

Officials pointed to a greater use of technology as a key factor in improving safety.

Instead of the canaries used by miners of old, today's underground workers use high-tech equipment that provides digital readouts of air quality. Other computerized systems monitor belts and loaders and can pinpoint a problem inside the mine with precision, Nash said.

In addition, each miner carries a personal breathing apparatus for emergencies, and fire stations are posted every 1,200 feet throughout the mine. The Prosperity mine has been in operation for about five years and has 12 to 15 years of coal remaining, said Randy Beck, president of Vectren Fuels, the subsidiary that operates the company's mines.

Vectren also operates the Cypress Creek surface mine in Warrick County and is preparing to open two new underground mines near Vincennes, Ind., scheduled to begin operations in 2009 and 2010.

Vectren currently produces about 4.5 million tons of coal a year and uses 3 million tons for electrical generation. The remaining coal is sold to other utility companies.

While Vectren's Cypress Creek mine is projected to be depleted in two or three years, the company's two Knox County mines will push Vectren's annual coal production to 8 million tons.

The increase in coal production should be considered good news for consumers, Vectren spokesman Mike Roeder said. The use of natural gas as a fuel for electric generation has resulted in higher heating costs in the winter, he said.

"We believe coal is an important part of the state's economy," Roeder said. "We also believe coal is an important part of the nation's energy policy."